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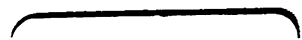
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Portland civil service
reform association.
Annual meeting.

1884



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PORTLAND

CIVIL-SERVICE REFORM

ASSOCIATION.

ANNUAL MEETING,

1884.

PORTLAND:

STEPHEN BERRY, PRINTER.

1884

ANNUAL MEETING.

The annual meeting of the Portland Civil-Service Reform Association was held at the Fraternity Rooms, No. 14 Free street, July 25, 1884.

President Putnam took the chair.

Mr. Sidney W. Thaxter, Chairman of the Executive Committee, presented the following report:

The executive committee appointed at the first meeting of this association was organized on the 5th of July, 1883. By-laws were afterward adopted for the government of the committee, providing for four sub-committees, or standing committees,—on membership, finance, publication, and public meetings. Under the direction of the committee on publication the constitution and by-laws with a list of officers of the association were printed in a pamphlet which has been placed in the hands of all members.

Notice was promptly sent to the secretary of the National Civil-Service Reform League, of the organization of the Portland association. Messrs. Edward C. Jordan and Henry St. John Smith were sent as delegates to attend the annual meeting of the League at Newport, in August; and in September the treasurer was directed to pay a moderate assessment for the maintenance of the League. The New York association had previously defrayed all the expenses of the national organization, but it was thought that the time had come when other associations might properly be invited to contribute, and in that opinion the Portland committee unanimously concurred.

The first examinations in Maine, under the act of January 16, 1883, "to regulate and improve the civil service of the United States," were held at the custom house in Portland in July, under the direction of Commissioner D. B. Eaton. Candidates were examined for appointment to the customs service in this district and to the departments at Washington. A special committee, consisting of Messrs. Sidney W. Thaxter, E. P. Payson and Thomas L. Talbot, was appointed to attend these examinations. The report of this committee was published in the daily newspapers. It was the opinion of the special committee that the questions were admirably adapted to test the practical knowledge and mental calibre of the applicants. The papers of candidates for the customs service were examined by a board of officers employed at this port, and the report especially commended this regulation, whereby the impartial judgment of intelligent and experienced men is directed to the appointment of their subordinates and assistants.

So satisfactory was the inauguration of the system, that in the fall Collector Dow selected the temporary force of inspectors for winter service by competitive examination, though it is doubtful whether these appointments come within the purview of the act of Jan. 16, 1883. As a result of that act, all permanent appointments to the customs service in this district, and the temporary appointments for the present, at least, are now open to any American citizens of suitable age and acquirements, without prejudice or favor on account of their political opinions, and with no obligation, express or implied, to perform political work or to contribute to political funds. The appointees are as free in these respects as any of their fellow citizens.

Under the new law, furthermore, it is not thought best for Federal officers and members of Congress to serve upon party committees. The collector of the port of Portland has declined a reelection to the Republican State committee. The collector of the port of Bath and the Representative of the fourth Congressional district were re-elected, but have resigned their places upon the committee. The national Republican convention in June adopted a rule excluding Senators, Representatives and other officers of the United States from the national committee. The Maine delega-

tion had already selected a Congressman to succeed Senator Frye upon the national committee, but made a new choice under the rule. The occasion of this exodus of office-holders from the committees is the provision of law forbidding them to solicit or receive, directly or indirectly, any contributions, voluntary or otherwise, for political purposes, from persons in the service of the United States. The penalty for levying political assessments has already been imposed in the case of Gen. N. M. Curtis, of the Republican State committee of New York, on complaint by the New York Civil-Service Reform Association; and the judgment of the circuit court of the United States has been sustained by the supreme court. The constitutional authority of Congress to regulate such matters is accordingly established, and a re-organization of the party committees was inevitable unless they were prepared to reject even voluntary contributions from employés of the government.

In November the executive committee circulated petitions for the repeal of those sections of the Revised Statutes of the United States restricting the term of certain officers to four years. The effect of this restriction is, to vacate during each Presidential term nearly every office filled by Presidential appointment. Our Presidents have no time for the proper consideration of changes which ought to be made in the public service, for cause; for they are constantly harassed about changes which must be made without cause. The abolition of the four-years term is necessary to give stability to the service, and to relieve the Executive of a useless and worse than useless burden, which interferes with higher duties. As the case stands now, questions of public policy must wait while the President considers the conflicting claims of candidates for places which are already well filled and ought not to be arbitrarily and needlessly vacated.

On the 4th of February a bill to repeal the four-years term, prepared by the National Civil-Service Reform League, was offered in the House of Representatives by Mr. Willis of Kentucky, and referred to the committee on reform in the civil service. On the 1st of March, a delegation from the League had a satisfactory hearing before the committee. A week later, the committee unani-

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sired that this wholesome law should be respected in letter and spirit.

In April a communication was received from the Massachusetts Reform club, asking the association to send delegates to an independent political convention, to be held in New York for the purpose of organizing a movement in favor of civil-service reform, a reduction of the revenue and a cessation of the compulsory coinage of silver. As the constitution of the Portland association expressly provides that "neither the name nor influence of the association shall be used on behalf of any party," the committee had plainly no authority to send delegates to a convention called for the purpose of organizing a party, and the secretary was instructed to make that explanation in reply to the invitation.

It has been proposed to open headquarters at some convenient place, where all members of the association can have an opportunity to examine the documents and letters received by the executive committee, and to confer together concerning the best methods of promoting the work for which the association was formed. This proposition the committee has thought it best to refer to the association at the annual meeting.

Mr. Edward C. Jordan, Treasurer, reported that all expenses of the association had been paid, and a balance remained in the treasury.

Officers were elected for the ensuing year :

President,

WILLIAM L. PUTNAM.

Vice Presidents,

GEORGE E. B. JACKSON,	FRANCIS K. SWAN.
SEWALL C. STROUT,	HENRY S. BURRAGE,
GEORGE S. HUNT,	WOODBURY S. DANA.

Executive Committee,

SIDNEY W. THAXTER, Chairman,	FREDERIC HENRY GERRISH,
FRANKLIN R. BARRETT,	GEORGE E. BIRD,

H. W. RICHARDSON,
EDWARD C. JORDAN,
FRANKLIN C. PAYSON,
FRANK W. ROBINSON,

EDWARD WOODMAN,
HENRY ST. JOHN SMITH,
WILLIAM M. BRADLEY,
JOHN M. GOULD.

Mr. Putnam thanked the association for continued confidence, and proceeded as follows :

The specific objects of this association, as shown by its constitution, are : first, to demand that appointments to subordinate executive offices shall be made from persons whose fitness has been ascertained by suitable examination ; and second, that removals from such offices shall be made only for legitimate cause, such as dishonesty, negligence or inefficiency, and not for political opinions or refusal to render party service ; and the general objects are stated to be for the purpose of "securing integrity, intelligence, efficiency, good order and due discipline in the civil service."

So far as these specific objects are concerned, there has been and there will continue to be a large field for discussion, and much to say for and against any fixed or rigid system of regulating the civil service. The objections to such systems for a free people are easily stated, and are suited to catch the popular breezes. Had our practical political methods retained their original characteristics and never put on their present phases, the civil service of the earlier days of these United States would be better suited to a republic than any adopted by any of the monarchical governments of Europe ; but inasmuch as the civil service, which should have been held up solely for the good of the people, has sunk to the level of a party machine, there seems no assured way of lifting it up again except with the aid of legislation, and all such schemes must be somewhat arbitrary and rigid. Yet the most popular objections to such legislative systems are largely met by the truth, that while the avenues of entering the service are guarded, the power of the executive to dismiss from the service, and thereby to secure direct responsibility and also quick remedy for lack of efficiency or honesty, is not necessarily impaired ; at the same time the fact that the entrance avenues are so guarded, takes away the

temptation to create for political purposes vacancies which cannot be filled with mere pensioners of party.

The civil service bill reported during the last session of the present Congress fully recognizes this principle, by declaring that the officers covered by the bill should hold office "during the pleasure of the President."

Although the provisions expressed in the constitution of this association, look in terms only to the improvement of the civil service, a result is to be gained by such an improvement which may be vastly more important than the improvement itself, because affecting the very foundations of the republic. All parties now declare for a free ballot as the prime requisite of good government; but it has practically come to pass with us that the free caucus is a condition precedent to the free ballot, and without the free caucus the free ballot, however proclaimed, is but a delusion. To my mind the mere truth that the civil service reform, if successful, will free the caucus, more than outweighs all possible objections to such reform, even in the worst condition in which its opponents could depict it.

The constitution of this association provides that no person, by becoming a member thereof, shall be understood as forfeiting in any way his liberty of action. Considering this expression I deem myself free to discuss briefly the bill reported at the last session of the present Congress, which failed of passage. As the result of all the thought and observation which I have been able to give to affairs, I regard legislation as only a rallying point for the friends of reform; and as certain to accomplish nothing, unless general public opinion and popular action both follow, lead and accompany it. A sentiment has been evolved in favor of this reform which so lies across the path of every public man, that he is compelled to stop at it, or go over it or around it; so that the failure of this bill affords no just reason for discouragement. I think it is a fair question whether it is not better that any specific bill should be defeated, than that it should pass the House of Representatives under a suspension of the rules.

The scope of the bill reaches officers who by many have been regarded as high executive officers, such as district attorneys, marshals

and collectors of customs. As the bill was drawn and as interpreted by Mr. Lyman, it could not do mischief with reference to these officers, by reason of the provision of which I have spoken. The friends of civil service reform wish to carefully regard the practical bearings of all their measures. It may fairly be questioned whether district attorneys, marshals and collectors of customs should not be regarded as more than ministerial officers. By law and by the express nature of their offices district attorneys and marshals are the hands of the executive, whose aid he requires to reach out across this vast continent; and by an almost immemorial usage collectors of customs have fallen into the same category. Without them it would be impossible for the President of the United States to make his power in the execution of the laws quickly felt at all points within our territory; and it may therefore well be claimed that they should take color entirely from him and from his policy, and be subject to instant appointment and removal as he may from time to time consider the interests of the country require.

The fourth article of its constitution is wisely intended to prohibit this association from even incurring the suspicion of partisanship. This is necessary to the work of the association, because its purposes can succeed only by reaching the masses of our people without regard to party lines; and they would be indefinitely postponed if either of the great parties should become arrayed against them. So far as recognition of its principles is concerned, it cannot be justly said that civil service reform has an advantage in one party over another; but it is, however, natural that the Democratic party, hoping some time to obtain the reins of government, should feel there was a sort of injustice in coupling with the truth that the Republican party have substantially engrossed the national patronage, a system which might indefinitely retain to it this great mass of place and power. Against this, however, lies an equally serious consideration. If the Democratic party should come into power and should be forced to a complete re-distribution of the vast patronage of the government, it would find therein the seeds of its own speedy self-destruction.

A well adjusted system of civil service will establish a happy

mean, and enable a new party coming into power to remove from office all persons not especially qualified for their positions, all party pensioners, and all who turn over the performance of their duties to their assistants and devote their time and energies to the success of party; and will further enable it to refill the void thus created with new blood, drawn through the purifying examinations of the commissions, thus both improving the civil service and securing the foundations of the party itself.

The bill reported at the last session already referred to, recognizes the propriety of allaying the disquietude of party, by the provision that the bill should not apply to persons now in office.

I have already stated, that I regard an improved public opinion and general popular interest of more importance than legislation. The stream cannot rise higher than its source; and one need not go far to meet the notion, that any one who has enjoyed office for a considerable length of time, no matter how well qualified, has "had it long enough, and should give some one else a chance."

Under our New England system, which has pervaded the whole country, reforms come, not from the government to the people, but from the people to the government; and the sources of power and influence are in the school districts and not at the capitals. So long as the tenure of ministerial offices in our towns and cities is partisan, and so long as this partisan tenure is maintained with the approval, or at least without the dissent of local public opinion, no system applicable to the general government or to the State, can be devised which will be thorough, successful or permanent.

I speak frankly, but without intention of reflecting upon any individual or upon any city government in office at any particular time, when I call attention to the fact, without elaborating details, that so far as ministerial local offices are concerned, there is no spot where there is more partisan exclusiveness than is found here in this city of Portland; and yet I am bound to assume that this has all come about by an imperceptible growth, without any predetermined spirit of proscription, and contrary to the disposition and habits of a city so largely engrossed in business and so free from partisan disputes as ours. Yet the fact exists, and requires the attention of this association and of all our people; and

